DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 577 CS 216 094

AUTHOR Chapman, David W.
TITLE WAC and the First-Year Writing Course: Selling Ourselves Short.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Instructional Improvement; Interdisciplinary Approach; Teaching Methods; *Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing Improvement; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Composition Theory; Faculty Attitudes; *Writing Intensive Courses

ABSTRACT

The relationship between writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) programs and the first-year writing program has always been a delicate one. Although some WAC requirements have been formalized, faculty participation in programs is still largely voluntary. At Cornell University (New York), for example, teachers must require at least 6 and no more than 14 formal writing assignments. Qualifications required to teach a writing-intensive course and those required to teach the introductory writing course are not necessarily the same. A question to be raised is whether those in other disciplines possess the necessary education to teach writing, including understanding the theoretical issues that undergird writing instruction. Replacing freshman composition with seminars taught by faculty from departments across campus is not a realistic option for most colleges in America. Writing Across the Curriculum can be promoted without equating the rhetorical knowledge of those who teach writing-intensive courses with that of the composition faculty. (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 414 577

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

David W. Chapman

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
D. Chapman
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

WAC and the First-Year Writing Course: Selling Ourselves Short

The relationship between writing-across-the-curriculum programs and the first-year writing program has always been a delicate one. In some institutions, WAC is considered to be simply an extension of the freshman composition course. When Beaver College introduced WAC into their college curriculum in the late 70s, the freshman composition courses were modified to include at least one assignment drawn from a discipline other than English, such as biology or political science (Kinneavy 365). Writing-intensive courses in the major were expected to reinforce the skills developed in freshman composition. Furthermore, such courses would send a message to students that freshman composition was not simply a hurdle to pass on their way to the major.

In other places, however, the freshman composition course was seen as simply one element in the overall WAC program, or perhaps even an impediment to faculty acceptance of WAC. The debate over the relationship between WAC and the freshman program came to a head in 1988 when Catherine Pastore Blair declared that "the English department should have no special role in writing across the curriculum--no unique leadership role and no exclusive classes to teach--not even freshman composition" (383). In a companion article, Louise Z. Smith countered that English Departments were the ideal locus for the WAC program.

CS216054

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The debate has continued in various forms throughout the 1990s. Most WAC directors have received their graduate education in departments of English and have a faculty appointment in that discipline. In many cases, the WAC director is also the director of the freshman writing program or the campus writing center. Promoting the WAC program is seen, then, as a logical extension of the duties associated with the freshman composition program. In other cases, the WAC program is spearheaded by a faculty member outside of English who heads a WAC committee. Obviously, having a non-English faculty member leading the charge for the WAC program can ward off the accusations that the WAC program is a "power grab" by the English department.

The question of who will lead the WAC program on campus is crucial because the success of the program often hinges on personal leadership. David Russell has chronicled the demise of several cross-disciplinary programs that failed due to a lack of institutional support. Cynthia Cornell and David J. Klooster have written how the success of the WAC program can sometimes depend on the goodwill of a single faculty member:

> Our ten year program has been sustained largely by the commitment of a single faculty leader outside the English department. When this leader retires in five years, he may well have no successor. (10-11)

Although some WAC requirements have been formalized (e.g., students must take a certain number of writing-intensive courses), faculty participation in the program is still largely voluntary. The WAC director has been in the position of recruiting a volunteer army for a literacy war. Given

the competing demands on faculty time and energy, the importance of having charismatic and enthusiastic leadership for the program cannot be overstated.

As well as the issue of leadership, the question of funding can strain the relationship between the WAC program and the freshman composition program. In order to institutionalize the WAC program, the university must commit resources to pay for directors, secretarial support, workshop expenses, tutors, teaching assistants, writing fellows. At a few institutions the WAC program has become a big-ticket item, amounting to tens of thousands of dollars. Certainly, such costs can be justified as one of the few ways of directly improving the quality of instruction, but when resources are stretched thin, the funds being expended on WAC are likely to be jealously regarded by other academic units. Some freshman composition directors have found it ironic that the administration can devote large sums to the development of a WAC program while the freshman program is chronically understaffed, under-funded, and underappreciated.

At some institutions the establishment of the WAC program has resulted in the abolition of the traditional freshman composition course taught primarily, or even exclusively, by English department faculty. Such decisions are often made for theoretical as well as financial reasons. Administrators or faculty committees have sometimes eliminated or reduced required courses in composition at the freshman level in order to reinforce the notion that the responsibility for writing instruction belongs to the entire faculty. At some schools, the traditional composition course has been replaced with freshman seminars taught by faculty in various disciplines. The seminars are taught in the faculty member's area of expertise, but the

stated purpose of the course is to improve student writing. Consider, for instance, the freshman writing seminar at Cornell:

> The primary purpose of the Freshman Writing Seminar is to help students write good English expository prose . . . . Freshman Writing Seminars pursue this common aim through diverse offerings (more than 170 sections in more than 30 departments and programs). (*Publication of the John S. Knight Writing Program*, 1995-96)

The freshman writing seminars range from "Death and Dying in Anthropological Perspective" to "Disney's America." Although the faculty teach the course from a disciplinary perspective, the guidelines for the course are designed to ensure the centrality of writing in the course. At Cornell, teachers must require at least six, and no more than fourteen, formal writing assignments. At least two of these assignments must be seriously rewritten. They must spend "ample, regular classroom time" on the students' writing as well as scheduling at least two individual conferences. To ensure that writing remains the focus of the course, reading assignments are actually limited to a maximum of 75 pages per week.

Freshman seminars similar to the ones at Cornell have grown in popularity around the country, including the one Lex Runciman describes in a companion piece in this issue of JLLAD. I have already alluded to the budgetary logic of the freshman seminar approach. It also seems consistent with the general principles of WAC. If all teachers are qualified to teach writing in their disciplinary specializations, then why shouldn't they be teaching an introductory writing course? If anything, they should be more

qualified, since freshman writing is presumably less complex and sophisticated than the writing of upper division students.

What I would like to argue here is that the qualifications required to teach a writing-intensive course and those required to teach the introductory writing course are not necessarily the same. Furthermore, I would like to indicate some of the potential problems for both faculty and students when the freshman writing course is handed over to those with little background in writing instruction. In making these arguments I will be drawing on my own experiences with programs of this nature at various institutions. The evidence is admittedly anecdotal. I will leave it to you to decide whether my experiences are singular or, as I suspect, more universal in nature.

The first question to be raised about the ability of those in other disciplines to teach the introductory writing course is: "Do they possess the necessary education to perform this task well?" I mean, by this, not only are they competent writers, but do they understand the theoretical issues that undergird writing instruction. I have, for instance, received angry memos from faculty members who felt it was an imposition for them to participate in a WAC workshop. One of their first defenses was usually the long list of publications on their personal vitae. However, being a practicing writer does not guarantee success in the teaching of writing. In fact, the groundbreaking studies of Janet Emig, Linda Flower, and others have shown us how little awareness most writers have of their own composing processes. In fact, many academic writers are likely to fall back on advice that has little to do with their own writing experience. "Everything you need to know is in Strunk and White." "Be sure to have a clear thesis before you begin." "Never begin a sentence with a conjunction." And so on.

If your own graduate education was like mine, I had to do nearly as much unlearning as learning. The idea that writing was an epistemic activity was foreign to me. Writing was simply the expression of thoughts clearly conceived. The lack of correlation between grammatical knowledge and writing expertise was completely unacceptable to me. Surely, I hadn't completed all those school grammar exercises in vain. Time after time, in university committees charged with directing the writing program, I have argued that the purpose of a WAC program is much more than simply improving the grammatical correctness of student papers. But even if in one meeting the committee acknowledged the importance of writing as learning, the next meeting was likely to begin--tabula rasa--with a call for spelling exercises or sentence diagramming. Or, as one business professor succinctly put it to me: "You teach 'em how to write, and we'll teach 'em how to think."

This is not to say that all WAC programs are doomed to fail because the faculty are ineducable on composition theory and pedagogy. The success of such programs does hinge, however, on the willingness of the faculty to commit time and effort to understanding and applying these principles. The commitment to teach a writing-intensive course often requires a fairly minimal level of commitment: assign a few journals, divide the traditional research paper up into a sequence of assignments, provide some form of feedback during the writing process. However, all of these activities are connected to making the student a better chemist or speech pathologist or anthropologist or whatever that faculty member's personal passion happens to be. In every case, the writing is an instrumentality, not the focus of the course.

In the freshman writing class, the situation is quite different. Students are developing foundational skills in writing. Many of them are writing extended academic discourse for the first time. They may know little about using evidence to support a contention, about acceptable forms of argumentation, about the effects of organization and style on the reader's response. Unlike the senior anthropology major who has read enough to understand intuitively the forms of discourse and rules of evidence acceptable in that discipline, the freshman student often struggles with basic genre distinctions, attempting to write reports as though they were manifestoes or essays or poems. Not infrequently, the professoriate may find the labor required to assist the freshman student beneath his or her dignity. Such was the response of an outstanding history scholar at my own university. I was team teaching an interdisciplinary humanities course with him when he showed up in my office one day with an armload of journals. I assumed that he had brought these over to show me how he had responded to the students in his group, but his real expectation was that--as the English faculty member on our team--I would be grading them. Although I dissuaded him of this notion, it was clear from his students' responses that he never read the journals or gave them anything more than a cursory, terminal comment.

And this leads me to my final point. Most faculty think of responding to student writing as mere drudgery to be endured. Of course, even the composition specialist may sigh at approaching a stack of student papers. But there is nothing more inherently tedious about responding to papers than there is about studying mold spores or comparing variant manuscripts or any of a thousand other activities that researchers are routinely required to perform. The difference is, of course, that the investigation is motivated by

the hope of discovery. The botanist examines a thousand plants to learn how they respond to a particular soil treatment. For the composition specialist, the writing classroom is the greenhouse. How did students respond to this assignment? What models were used by students in organizing their papers? What can we learn about the way different genders interpret the assignment? What was the effect of collaborative work? What classroom activities contributed to significant revisions? As Mina Shaughnessy demonstrated so brilliantly, the papers most readily dismissed by others may generate the greatest insights by the dedicated researcher. And just the way that I cannot imagine a life dedicated to studying mold spores or wheat blight, I cannot expect all professors to have the same enthusiasm for composition research. It appears that in some of the WAC programs that have proved most successful--I am thinking particularly of Young and Fulwiler's work at Michigan Tech--the faculty became involved in significant research and publication on the nature of their own disciplinary discourse. Still, it seems unreasonable to ask everyone at the university to develop an interest in composition studies. That is a disciplinary imperialism that even the staunchest of WAC emperors would hesitate to pursue.

I trust my remarks will not be construed as a specific attack on any particular school or program. I suppose with enough dedication and resources we could equip every faculty member to teach calculus or metaphysical poetry. But I do not think that replacing freshman composition with freshman seminars taught by faculty from departments across campus is a realistic option for most colleges in America. For the reasons I have outlined above, faculty have neither the preparation nor the inclination to provide the foundational course in writing for entering students.

Furthermore, I think that those who promote such schemes may actually undermine the legitimacy of the composition course. For some administrators, eliminating the freshman course is simply a convenient way of handling budget constraints. For some faculty, it is a way of putting a favorite hobby horse into the curriculum. For some writing program administrators, it may be a way of addressing the chronic shortage of faculty needed to staff the writing courses. But none of these reasons focuses on the needs of students and the key role the composition course plays in their future academic success.

Instead, the freshman seminar approach only reinforces the classic complaint leveled against those who teach rhetoric, that they have no real discipline, just, as Plato would have it, a bag of tricks used without any real knowledge. I do not think that writing-across-the-curriculum programs, per se, necessarily lead to this conclusion. After all, we ask students to read in all of their courses, but not everyone considers himself or herself an expert on reading. Similarly, we can promote writing across the curriculum without equating the rhetorical knowledge of those who teach writing-intensive courses with that of the composition faculty. But to place the courses dedicated to writing instruction into the hands of those who have, perhaps, given a day or so to thinking seriously about how to teach writing to others, is an act that sells short the expertise of those of us in this disciplinary community and which contributes to the tenuousness of a course which is already moored on the edge of the academic mainland.

Works Cited

Blair, Catherine Pastore. "Only One of the Voices: Dialogic Writing Across the Curriculum." *College English* 50 (1988): 383-89.

Cornell, Cynthia and David J. Klooster. "Writing Across the Curriculum: Transforming the Academy?" *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 14.1-2 (1990): 7-16.

Emig, Janet. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders.* Research Report 13. National Council of Teachers of English. Urbana, IL: 1971.

Flower, Linda and John R. Hayes. "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 32 (1981): 365-87.

Kinneavy, James L. "Writing Across the Curriculum," *Teaching Composition: 12 Bibliographical Essays.* Ed. Gary Tate. Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1987.

Publication of the John S. Knight Writing Program, 1995-96. Cornell University.

Russell, David R. "Writing Across the Curriculum and the Communications Movement: Some Lessons from the Past." *College Composition and Communication* 38 (1987): 184-94.

Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations.* New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

Smith, Louise Z. "Why English Departments Should 'House' Writing Across the Curriculum." *College English* 50 (1988): 390-95.